
***The Hotline
Outcomes Assessment Study***

**Final Report - Phase III:
Full-Scale Telephone Survey**

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Executive Summary

The Center for Policy Research (CPR) has worked with the project for the Future of Equal Justice (PFEJ) since June 1999 to conduct the Hotline Outcomes Assessment Study, an independent assessment of the effectiveness of using telephone Hotlines to provide brief legal advice and referrals to low-income people. This report describes the results of Phase III of the Study, which researched whether clients understand the advice they are given by Hotlines, whether they follow up on it, and whether they realize a satisfactory resolution of their problems.

The study methodology included:

- Generating samples of callers at five legal Hotlines that were representative of the total universe of clients served at legal services programs;
- Conducting telephone interviews with 2,034 callers three to six months after they contacted the Hotlines and eliciting their general reactions to the Hotlines, as well as the specific outcomes of their cases;
- Having experienced legal services lawyers generate both factual and evaluative assessments of outcomes, which were based on a review of case files and interview notes, including verbatim responses to questions about legal outcomes; and
- Analyzing the resulting data set to produce profiles of callers across the five sites and outcome patterns with special attention to the client, case, and advice characteristics of cases with favorable and unfavorable outcome patterns.

The key findings were:

- **Where an outcome could be determined, Hotline cases were almost evenly split between successful (48%) and unsuccessful (52%) outcomes.**
- **When callers understand what they are told to do and follow the advice they are given, they tend to prevail.** Only 6 percent of all clients received unfavorable results because they did not prevail after following the advice of Hotline workers. In contrast, 13 percent failed because they did not understand the advice that was given, and 9 percent because they lacked the time, initiative, or courage to try to do what the worker suggested.
- **Most clients who do not act fail to understand the advice they are given or are too intimidated or overwhelmed to attempt the recommended action.** Three to six months after phoning the Hotline, 21 percent of callers had not acted on the advice they received. About a quarter of the no action cases were attributed to clients not understanding what they were supposed to do, another 25 percent were too afraid to try or lacked the time or initiative, and an additional 10 percent were told to hire a private attorney and reported that they could not afford or find one.

- **Many Hotline cases result in outcomes that cannot readily be classified as successful or unsuccessful.** Success could not be gauged for many clients because they had a matter that was still pending three to six months after phoning the Hotline (19%) or their responses to questions about their cases were so unclear that PFEJ lawyers were unable to determine outcomes (9%).
- **Certain types of Hotline services are more apt to result in favorable outcomes.** Brief services yielded the highest favorable outcome ratings, followed in order by coaching clients on how to deal with a private party; providing written legal information, and coaching clients on how to proceed pro se in court. Favorable assessments were still lower when clients were instructed on dealing with a government agency or were referred to another agency.
- **Clients who were told to hire a private attorney had the worst outcomes and were the most dissatisfied.** Only 11 percent of clients who were told to hire an attorney achieved favorable case outcomes and 52 percent rated the Hotline as unhelpful. Of clients who were advised by Hotline workers to hire a private attorney, only 18 percent did so.
- **Outcomes for housing and consumer cases are most apt to be rated favorably, while family cases are most apt to be pending.** Housing and consumer cases had the highest rate of favorable outcomes, while family cases were lowest with many still pending when clients were interviewed. The findings for housing cases may reflect the fact that many unsuccessful housing clients had moved and were not reachable for an interview.
- **Hotline clients with the best and worst case results had distinct demographic characteristics.** Clients with outcomes that were rated most favorably were significantly more likely to be white, English-speaking, educated at least to the eighth-grade level, and have a marital status other than being separated from a spouse. Clients who received the least favorable outcomes were Spanish-speaking, Hispanic, individuals with the lowest education levels, those who reported no income, and those who were separated and lived apart from their spouse.
- **Many clients face barriers that may affect their ability to follow through on Hotline advice.** Many Hotline callers disclosed problems that may affect their ability to handle their legal problem such as: a family disability or a serious health problem; serious transportation problems; depression or fear of an ex-partner or current household member; inflexible work, school, or daycare schedules; or problems reading or speaking English well enough to complete forms and other legal paperwork. While clients with disabilities fared no worse than the average, the other barriers listed above were associated with outcomes that were significantly less favorable.
- **Some types of follow-up actions by the Hotline may boost the chances of callers experiencing favorable results.** Higher favorable outcomes were associated with getting a letter or other written material, a follow-up phone call from the Hotline, or help from someone other than the Hotline worker.

- **Clients rated their experiences with Hotlines favorably.** Nearly half (41%) characterized the Hotline as “very helpful” and 28 percent as “somewhat helpful.” Two-thirds of clients at every site credited the Hotline with helping them make better decisions, feel more confident about their abilities, and keep the problem from escalating.
- **Disappointed Hotline callers typically said there was nothing anyone could do or that they wanted a lawyer to do more for them, although a small fraction of callers complained about being treated rudely.** Approximately 2 percent of callers complained about disrespectful and uncaring treatment by Hotline workers.
- **User satisfaction ratings are associated with Hotline outcomes, but the relationship is not perfect.** While 63 percent of clients with favorable outcomes gave the Hotline a “very favorable” rating versus only 19 percent of clients with unfavorable outcomes, a third (32%) with unfavorable outcomes rated the Hotline as “somewhat helpful.” A quarter of the clients who did not follow the Hotline’s advice or did not prevail rated the Hotline as “very helpful.”

Recommendations

To increase the ratio of favorable to unfavorable outcomes, Hotlines should adopt the following measures to enhance understanding and promote action:

- **Hotlines should recognize that certain demographic groups are particularly less likely to obtain favorable outcomes.** Hotlines should develop special protocols for dealing with non-English speakers, individuals at the lowest education levels, and those who report no income, possibly including increased support or more extended services.
- **Policymakers should take further steps to evaluate whether Hotlines are an appropriate method of delivering service to non-English speakers.** Although the non-English speaking clients in this study were provided services by the Hotline in Spanish, they had a particularly high rate of failure to act due to inability to understand the Hotline advice.
- **Hotlines should screen callers for certain barriers that are associated with unfavorable outcomes.** Hotlines should routinely question clients about a variety of barriers that affect their ability to address their legal problems and obtain successful outcomes. Screening for these problems is likely to require special attention during intake, since the PFEJ lawyers noted that most of these barriers could not be discerned from existing case files. Hotlines should develop protocols for dealing with these clients, possibly including increased support or more extended services.

- **Hotlines should institute or improve follow-up procedures.** Hotlines would do well to institute tickler systems flagging cases for a callback to check on the client's progress. Cases that should be flagged are those in which one of the following factors is present:
 - The recommended action is one where clients are less likely to obtain a favorable outcome: representing self in court; dealing with a government agency; obtaining legal assistance from another provider.
 - The client falls into one of the demographic categories identified above that are less likely to obtain a favorable outcome.
 - The client reports one of the barriers described above as associated with a reduced likelihood of obtaining a favorable outcome.

- **Hotlines should develop or increase their capacity to provide brief services or institute a brief services unit.** Brief services are more likely to result in successful outcomes than advice or referral services. In cases where it may be possible to resolve the client's problem with a letter, telephone call, or completion of a form or referral, it is likely to be a more effective use of resources for the Hotline or a related unit to perform the action than for the Hotline to advise the client how to do so.

- **Hotlines that do not routinely provide written information to clients should do so.** The provision of written information, whether a generic pamphlet on an issue or a letter detailing the advice provided, increases the likelihood of a successful outcome.

- **Hotlines should recognize that telling a caller that they should obtain a private attorney is unlikely to result in a successful outcome.** Most clients who are advised by the Hotline to retain a private attorney, particularly in divorce cases, will not be able to afford one willing to take their case. Hotlines should explore alternative services that are more likely to result in successful outcomes.

- **Hotlines should be aware of the limitations of client satisfaction data and analyze the data they get in ways that maximize their utility.** While user satisfaction is a legitimate and an important indicator, it is not a perfect measure of Hotline effectiveness. Clients are frequently more generous in their evaluations of Hotlines than their personal situations would suggest, which may reflect the fact that some clients who do not get what they want feel empowered by the information they receive.

- **Hotlines should conduct random follow-up telephone interviews with clients.** In order to more accurately assess performance, Hotlines would do well to institute random follow-up interviews to gauge the effectiveness of their services and to identify ways to improve them.